

Virginia's Smart Beginnings Kindergarten Readiness Assessment Pilot

Results summary from the 2013/14 pilot of
Teaching Strategies GOLD® in 14 Virginia
school divisions

Why KRA?

- Since the inception of Smart Beginnings, VECF has heard about a need for more information about children's readiness for Kindergarten.
- Having more information about children's school readiness, growth, and development:
 - Supports program monitoring, evaluation, and improvement.
 - Informs local program choices and daily instruction/lesson plans.
 - Helps identify children's strengths and challenges, enabling earlier intervention.

Why Teaching Strategies GOLD®?

- School superintendents, local early childhood leaders, teachers, and state early learning and school improvement staff indicated an interest in:
 - A single, online tool to measure readiness for and growth in Kindergarten
 - Authentic, observation-based measure with potential to improve instructional practice
 - Tool that complemented PALS
- Selected GOLD based on recommendations from a technical committee with representation from:
 - Virginia's school divisions, researchers from UVA, VT, VCU, the Virginia Department of Education, and Smart Beginnings.

TS GOLD assessment system

- Pilot used a customized version of GOLD, aligned to Virginia's Foundation Blocks for Early Learning and Standards of Learning
 - 2 content areas (literacy, mathematics).
 - 4 developmental areas (social-emotional, physical, language, and cognitive).
 - Measures of fall readiness and progress were available.
- Designed to facilitate **developmentally-appropriate**, ongoing, observation-based **assessment during regular classroom activities**.
- Teachers document children's skills and abilities based on whether they **demonstrate** content, concept, and skill **mastery** in the classroom.
- Intended use is **embedded into the teaching and learning process**—not a separate paper/pencil or task-based assessment.

Pilot participation in Virginia

- 14 school divisions
- 32 schools
- 79 classrooms serving ~1440 children from diverse communities
- Teachers ranged from novice (first- and second-year teachers) to veterans (teaching 30 or more years)

VECF's pilot was designed to:

- Examine the feasibility of incorporating a multi-dimensional assessment into Kindergarten classrooms.
- Inform efforts focused on strengthening children's early learning experiences.
- Add value while supporting effective and excellent teaching and learning in Kindergarten.
- Assess the benefits of consistent multi-dimensional assessment across diverse communities.

What teachers valued

- The focus on the whole child—teachers recognized and valued a holistic approach.
- Clear information on the developmental continuum.
- Systematic, ordered learning trajectories, sufficiently granular to inform lesson planning.
 - Helped teachers ensure that children succeeded in each step of the continuum, without skipping important content, concepts, and skills.
- Children's learning and developmental levels in multiple domains, relative to the norm.

Reliability and validity

- Reliability
 - Three measurement approaches suggested that teachers became more reliable in their use of GOLD throughout the school year.
 - Results further suggest a need for additional skill building in the use of observation-based measures.
- Assessed teachers' perception of GOLD's appropriateness for Virginia's Kindergarten classroom.
 - Most teachers reported that GOLD was appropriate for students.

Feedback from teachers

- Survey and interview data made clear that the majority of pilot classrooms were not set up to support multi-dimensional, observation-based assessment.
- Teachers reported not having time to observe children demonstrating skills in practical, hands-on activities.
 - They are expected to deliver whole- or small-group instruction nearly all day.
- Instruction is focused on English/language arts and mathematics.
 - Teachers reported not having the time or incentives to focus on other domains of learning and development.
- Teachers in the pilot voluntarily added GOLD without eliminating other assessments, highlighting redundancies and burden.

We learned so much more...

- This pilot demonstrated was that **there are no simple, quick solutions to our readiness challenges.**

“GOLD focuses a lot of attention on social-emotional that I do not typically monitor. I appreciate that GOLD draws my attention to this important aspect of teaching, yet got frustrated with my inability to adequately provide opportunities for students to use those skills to be assessed because of the pace and expectations of K.”

-- VECF pilot teacher, 2013

We learned so much more...

- To make thoughtful decisions that benefit children, the conversation needs to be about more than just data, more than just what percent of children aren't ready.

“Although my philosophy totally embraces looking at the whole child ...time for children to play, interact with each other in natural situations, develop social skills, and grow at their own rate are not valued right now in education. Kindergarten classes are regimented, toys and blocks are being removed, written tests and paperwork are being increased....”

--VECF Pilot teacher, 2013

Recommendations

- Just like SOL Reform, Virginia needs a **robust, multi-stakeholder, statewide conversation** about how we want to structure these important early years in education.
- A strategic approach is critical, with **curriculum, instruction, assessment, professional development, classroom structure, incentives and expectations aligned** with academic and developmental learning goals.
- Defining the assessment piece of this puzzle in isolation can have unintended and in some cases predictable consequences.

Pathways forward/opportunities

- Virginia's preK expansion grant (federal funding)
 - Focuses on underperforming schools and preschool excellence for at-risk children
 - Requires assessment in preK and K
 - Allows Virginia to test a comprehensive, vertically aligned system of curriculum, instruction, assessment, and support.
 - Participating communities are diverse in size, geography, and existing support systems.
 - Includes funds for program evaluation.
- Work with partners (VSBA, VASS, VEA, VAESP, PTA, etc.) to develop and support strong professional development pathways for teachers of young children.
- Thoughtful alignment with SOL Innovation Committee activities and stakeholders.

More Information

- Read VECF's full report:
http://vecf.org/Portals/5/PDFs/VECF_KRA_Pilot_Report_Final.pdf.
- Contacts:
 - Deborah Jonas
VECF Chewing Research Fellow
Djonas@ResearchAnalyticInsights.com; 804-252-5714
 - Kathy Glazer
VECF President
kathy@vecf.org; 804-358-8323